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THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION.

BY GOLDWIN SMITH, D.C.L.

“I EXPRESS myself,” says Bishop Butler, “with caution, lest I should be mistaken to vilify reason, which is, indeed, the only faculty which we have to judge concerning anything, even revelation itself; or be misunderstood to assert that a supposed revelation cannot be proved false from internal characters.” “The faculty of reason,” he says, “is the candle of the Lord within us against vilifying which we must be very cautious.”

What would the world be without religion? That is the dread question which seems now to be everywhere presenting itself. Would even the social fabric remain unshaken? Has not its stability partly depended on the general belief that the dispensation, with all its inequalities, was the ordinance of the Creator, and that for inequalities here there would be compensation hereafter? The belief may not in common minds have been very present; but it would seem to have had its influence. Apparently, it is now departing. In some places it appears to have fled. Scepticism, with social unrest, comes in its room.

What is now the position of the clergy? Keepers and ministers of truth, as they are understood to be, they alone are debarred by ordination vows and tests from the free quest of truth. They are ecclesiastically bound not only to hold, but to teach and preach, as divinely revealed, what many of them must feel to have been disproved or to have become doubtful. Their uneasiness is shown by writings, such as “*Lux Mundi*,” struggling to reconcile orthodoxy with free thought. It is shown by a growing tendency on the part of pastors to slide from the office of spiritual guide into that of leader of philanthropic effort and social reform. It is seen, perhaps, even in the tendency to give

increased prominence to musical attraction in the service. Sermons grow more secular.

Clerical biographies, such as that of Jowett, sometimes reveal private misgivings. The writer has even seen the pastorate of a large parish assumed by a man who in private society was an undisguised free-thinker and must have satisfied his conscience by promising to himself that he would do a great deal of social good. There is, no doubt, practically, more latitude than there was; heresy trials seem to have ceased, and one of the writers of "Essays and Reviews" became, without serious outcry, Primate of the Church of England. But ordination vows remain; so does the performance of a religious service which includes the repetition of creeds and forms a practical confession of faith. Hollow profession cannot fail to impair mental integrity or, if generally suspected, to kill confidence in our guides. Read Canon Farrar's "Life of Christ" and you will see to what shifts orthodoxy puts a clerical writer who was, no doubt, a sincere lover of truth.

The religious disturbance shows itself at the same time in the prevalence of wild superstitions, such as Spiritualism, rising out of the grave of religious faith, and attesting the lingering craving for the supernatural, somewhat like the mysteries of Isis after the fall of national religion at Rome.

The crisis has come on us rather suddenly, in consequence partly of great physical discoveries. The writer as a young student heard Buckland struggling to reconcile geology with Genesis. Now the struggle is to reconcile Genesis with geology. Before this wonderful advance of science and criticism combined, there had been comparatively little of avowed, still less of popular, scepticism. Rousseau was a sentimental theist; Voltaire erected a church to God. This vast "Modernism," as the poor, quaking Pope rather happily calls the ascendancy of science and criticism, has changed all. It is conceivable that, now as on some former occasions, the range of discovery may have been overrated and the pendulum of opinion may consequently have swung too far. Evolution, apparently, has still a wide space to traverse, even in what may be assumed to be the material sphere. What can it make of the marvellous stores of memory or of the apparently boundless play of the imagination, which by its working in sleep, sometimes with no assignable materials for the fancy, seems almost to show creative power? Besides, Evolution

must itself have been evolved. What power evolved it? What power impregnated the germ with all this vast and marvellous design?

Has Deity directly revealed itself to man? It has if the Bible is inspired. Otherwise, apparently, it has not. About the Koran or the Zendavesta it is hardly necessary to speak. "The Bible" we call the Old Testament and the New bound up together, as though they contained the two halves of the same dispensation and the moral ideal of both were the same. The historical importance of the Old Testament can hardly be overrated; nor can the literary grandeur of parts of it, or the advance made by it in social character and law. When in connection with the question of American slavery attention was specially directed to the social law of Moses, no careful reader could fail to be greatly struck by its advanced humanity and civilization. Nevertheless, the morality of the Old Testament is tribal, while that of the New Testament is universal. The tribal character of the Old Testament morality is seen in the destruction of the first-born in Egypt to force Pharaoh to let the Chosen People go; in the invasion of Canaan and the slaughter of the Canaanites; in the murder of Sisera; in the approval of the treason of Rahab; in David's putting to torture the inhabitants of a captured city. The attempt to reconcile all this with universal morality by styling it the course of "Evolution" can hardly avail, since the spirit of tribal separatism dominates in the latest books of the Old Testament, Ezra and Nehemiah, where Israelites are not only forbidden for the future to marry with Gentiles, but bidden to put away Gentile wives. It is true there are glimpses of a universal dominion of the God of Israel, and of the happiness to be enjoyed by all nations under it. Still, it is Jehovah, Israel's God.

Were the Old Testament a Divine revelation it would certainly be free from error concerning the works of Deity, which plainly it is not. The narrative in Genesis of creation, compared with other primitive cosmogonies, is rational as well as sublime. But if Professor Buckland could persuade his hearers he could not persuade himself. Later still, we had Gladstone striving with his wonderful gift of interpretation to show that the Creator in dictating an account of the creation had come wonderfully near the fact. The process of the creation, its

chronology, and its order, Noah's flood, the ages of the Patriarchs, the stopping of the sun by Joshua, are all apparently death-blows to the simple faith with which our childhood read the Old Testament. The hare is made a ruminating animal, and the excuse apologists offer for the mistake, without curing it, only stamps it more distinctly as an offspring of human simplicity.

Largely good the influence of the Old Testament has no doubt been; largely also it prepared the way for the New. That its influence has been wholly good cannot be said. It has furnished fanaticism with aliment and excuse. It has found mottoes for the black flag of religious war.

Is it possible to believe, in face of doubtful authenticity, contradictions as to fact, and traces of local superstition, that the New Testament any more than the Old was dictated by Deity? Inspired by the creative power, in common with the other works of creative beneficence, as a part of the general plan, the New Testament may have been. Its morality is not tribal, but universal. This beside the well of Samaria was proclaimed. If there is any privilege it is in favor not of race, but of class, the class being the poor, whose poverty seems counted to them as virtue, perhaps rather to the disparagement of active goodness.

Had the New Testament been divinely inspired, would not its authority have been clearly attested? Would not the authorship of its books have been made known? Would the slightest error or self-contradiction have been allowed to appear in it? What is the fact? The authenticity of a large portion of the Epistles of St. Paul is admitted by the critics; of the other books of the New Testament the authorship is regarded as doubtful. The three Synoptic Gospels have a large element common to them all, and are evidently grafts upon a single document which is lost, and which the critics generally seem inclined to place not earlier than the latter part of the first century. The Synoptics all tell us that when Jesus expired the veil of the Temple was rent. One adds that there was preternatural darkness; a third that the earth quaked, that the rocks were rent, that the graves opened, and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, came out of the graves after the resurrection of Jesus, went into the holy city, and appeared to many. It is plain that such portents must have produced an immense sensation; such a sensation, it may be assumed, as would have

brought scepticism to its knees. This surely must be legendary, and the legend must have had time to grow.

Though grafts on the same original stock, the Synoptic Gospels are often at variance with each other; as in the case of the genealogy of Jesus upon which the Harmonists labor in vain; in that of the marvels attending his birth; in that of his keeping the Passover or his Last Supper; in that of the resurrection, which again baffles the skill of the Harmonists. Here, surely, is proof that the pens of the narrators were not guided by Omniscience.

Concerning the miracles of the casting out of devils generally, and in particular of the casting out of a legion of devils into a herd of two thousand swine at Gadara, what is to be said? Are these not clearly cases of human imagination set at work by a Jewish superstition? Is it possible that they should have had a place in a divine narrative of the life of the Saviour of the world? The Fourth Gospel omits them. Orthodoxy would fain persuade itself that this was to avoid unnecessary repetition.

Satan from the top of a mountain shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth. This seems to imply belief that the earth is a plane. The movement of the star of the Nativity seems to imply belief in the rotation of the heavens.

About the authorship of the Fourth Gospel, and, consequently, about its title to belief, there has been endless controversy among the learned. But there are pretty plain indications, in the shape of the omission of the demoniac miracles and some lack of local knowledge, that it is not the work of a Palestinian Jew. Opening with a reference to the Logos, it strikes the key of Alexandrian philosophy. It is, indeed, rather theological than historical, so that it has been not inaptly compared to the Platonic, in contrast to the Xenophontic, account of Socrates, and the theology seems like that of a post-evangelical era. Martineau's conclusion is that "the only Gospel which is composed and not merely compiled and edited, and for which, therefore, a single writer is responsible, has its birthday in the middle of the second century, and is not the work of a witness at all." Historically, this Gospel is at variance with the others in its narrative of the Last Supper. "The incidents," says the highly orthodox Speaker's Commentary, "are parallel with sections of the Synoptic Gospels; but there are very few points of actual correspondence

in detail between the narratives of the Synoptists and of St. John." Something more than impressive resemblance would surely have been found between narratives, equally authentic and inspired, of a momentous crisis in the life of the Saviour.

"At this point, that is to say the beginning of the Galilean ministry, we are again met by difficulties in the chronology, which are not only various, but to the certain solution of which there appears to be no clue. If we follow exclusively the order given by one Evangelist we appear to run counter to the scattered indications which may be found in another. That it should be so will cause no difficulty to the candid mind. The Evangelists do not profess to be guided by chronological sequences." So writes Dean Farrar in despair. Is it likely that such confusion would be found in a Divine revelation? Would not the narratives have been as well arranged and clear as, by the admission of Orthodoxy, they are the reverse? Would the names of the authors of the Gospels, their warrants and the sources of their information, have been withheld? Providence surely was not here.

If there was a miraculous revelation on which salvation depended, why was it not universal? Why has it all this time been withheld from nations even more in need of it than those to whom it was given? Are we to suppose that the salvation of these myriads was a matter of indifference to their Creator, or that Heaven preferred the slow and precarious working of the missionary to the instantaneous action of its own fiat? This is the question which scepticism asks, and which the great author of the "Analogy of Religion" fails to answer.

What did Jesus think of himself and his mission, and of his relation to Deity? This it seems impossible without more authentic records clearly to decide. The Gospel of St. John, which is the most theological, would appear to be the least trustworthy of the four. Its author, apparently, sees its subject through a theosophic medium of his own. The idea of the teacher in the mind of the disciples would naturally rise with his ascendancy; so, perhaps, would his own idea. If Jesus is rightly reported he believed himself to be the Son of God, exalted to union and participation in spiritual dominion with the Father, and destined together with the Father to judge the world. But, in his mortal hour of anguish in Gethsemane, he prays to the Father to let the cup pass from him; an act hardly consistent with the doc-

trines of the Athanasian Creed. In the immortality of the soul and judgment after death he plainly believes. But he does not substantiate the belief by any explanation of the mode of survival; nor, in separating the two flocks of sheep and goats, does he say how mixed characters are to be treated. Tribalism seems slightly to cling to his conception of the just gathered in Abraham's bosom. Of his apologue of Dives and Lazarus, the last part appears to show that the world beyond the grave was to him a realm of the imagination.

The Sermon on the Mount would appear, by the strong impress of character it bears, to have special claims to authenticity. So may the Parables habitually employed as instruments of teaching and wearing apparently the stamp of a single imagination.

That with Jesus of Nazareth there came into the world, and by his example and teaching was introduced and propagated a moral ideal which, embodied in Christendom, and surviving through all these centuries the action of hostile forces the most powerful, not only from without, but from within, has uplifted, purified, and blessed humanity is a historical fact. With the civilization of Christendom no other civilization can compare. But we have been accustomed to believe that there was a miraculous revelation of the Deity. A revelation of the Deity, though not miraculous, Christianity may be believed to have been.

Revelation, direct and assured, of the nature, will, designs, or relation to us of the Deity through the Bible or in any other way we cannot be truly said to have. All that we apparently can be said to have, besides the religious instinct in ourselves, is the evidence of beneficent design in the universe; balanced, we must sadly admit, by much that with our present imperfect knowledge appears to us at variance with beneficence; by plagues, earthquakes, famines, torturing diseases, infant deaths; by the sufferings of animals preyed on by other animals or breeding beyond the means of subsistence; by inevitable accidents of all kinds; by the Tower of Siloam everywhere falling on the just as well as on the sinner. There may be a key, there may be a plan, disciplinary or of some other kind, and in the end the mystery may be solved. At present there seems to be no key other than that which may be suggested by the connection of effort with virtue and the progress of a collective humanity.

At the same time, we may apparently dismiss belief in a great

personal power of evil and in his realm of everlasting torture. The independent origin of such a power of evil is unthinkable; so is the struggle between the two powers and its end. There is no absolutely distinct line between good and evil. The shades of character are numberless.

Another great change, rather of impression than of conviction, has been creeping over the religious scene. We have hitherto, largely, perhaps, under the influence of the Bible, been fancying rather than thinking that this little earth of ours was the centre of all things, the special object of interest to the Creator; and that the grand drama of existence was that enacted on this terrestrial stage and culminating in Redemption. Astronomical science is now making us distinctly feel that this world is only one, and, if magnitude is to be the measure, very far from the most important, of myriads of worlds governed by the same physical laws as ours, forming a system of which ours is a member, while the destiny of the whole system is to us utterly inscrutable; proofs of the most sublime and glorious order presenting themselves on the one hand, while on the other we see signs of disorder and destruction, errant bodies such as comets and aërolites, a moon without an atmosphere, the conflagration of a star. Whether the whole is moving towards any end and, if it is, what that end is to be, we cannot hope to divine. When with Infinity we take into our thought Eternity, past and future, if in Eternity there can be said to be past or future, our minds are completely overwhelmed.

Is belief in a future life generally holding its ground? My friend, the late Mr. Chamberlain, was by no means alone in resigning it. But if this life is all, how can we continue to hold our faith in divine justice? Mr. Chamberlain, as I said before, was evidently happy as well as good. His life, though short and regarded by him as ending in the grave, was to him so much gain, and proved beneficence on the part of the Author of his being. But if Mr. Chamberlain's theory is true, what is to be said in the case of the myriads to whom life has been wretchedness, ending perhaps in agony, often without the slightest responsibility on their part? For these unhappy ones would it be well, as Mr. Chamberlain holds it was for him, that there should be no hereafter? Is their being brought into existence only to suffer compatible with our faith in supreme benevolence? Is con-

fidence in supreme justice compatible with the conviction that the tyrant and the tortured victims of his tyranny, alike, repose forever in the grave? Such, it is true, was the belief of the Hebrew; indication of any other belief, at all events, he has left us none, unless it be a faint glimpse of Sheol. The philosophy of Job halts accordingly. The Hebrew believed that he would be rewarded or punished in his posterity.

Bishop Butler's grand argument for belief in the possibility of a future life goes upon the supposition that our conscious personality is distinct and separable from our perishable frame, and is in itself "indiscernible," so that there is no reason why it should not survive the death of the body. To prove that it ever has survived the death of the body, or to show the mode of its survival, the Bishop does not attempt. But Butler lived long before Evolution and the general advance of physiology in these later days. Johnson, who was no sceptic, owned that he yearned for more light on the "spiritual world," by which he apparently meant immortality.

Positivism tenders us endless existence as particles in a collective humanity, the "colossal man." But would there be much satisfaction in existence when individuality and personal consciousness had been lost? Would the prospect lead the ordinary man to work and suffer for the future generations, at all events, for any beyond the circle of the immediate objects of his love? What the end of the colossal man is to be seems undetermined. The Positivist Church has produced very good and beautiful lives, but its power as a religion to go alone would be more clearly seen were not Christianity at its side.

The writer is not tendering proofs, but asking for them, stating the difficulties which prevail, and pleading for perfect freedom of discussion. Otherwise he would ask whether there is not still something in human nature apparently unsusceptible of physical explanation and seeming to point to the possibility of a higher state of being. Evolution may ultimately explain our general frame, emotional and intellectual, as well as physical. It may in time explain the marvels of imagination and memory. It may explain our æsthetic nature with our music and art. It may explain even our social and political frame and our habit of conformity to law. But beyond conformity to law, social or political, is there not, in the highest specimens of our race at

least, a conception of an ideal of character and an effort to rise to it which seem to point to a more spiritual sphere?

Necessarianism, whether in the philosophic form or in that of the Westminster Confession, would apparently make short work of all moral questions by reducing us to automatons. But Necessarianism depends on the assumption that there is only one factor in action, namely, motive; and that, if you knew the agent's motive, you could invariably predict his action. But reflection tells us that there are two factors in action, motive and volition, and that of this we are conscious as often as we hesitate in action, though not when the action is a matter of course.

One great change in the ecclesiastical world appears to be at hand. The Papal autocracy was the creation of Hildebrand, who for that purpose allied himself with Norman Conquest, and demanded of William the Conqueror the political homage which the Conqueror was too strong to yield, but which Popes, notably Innocent III, afterwards succeeded in extorting from weaker kings. Before Hildebrand there had been only a western Primacy or Patriarchate round which, when western Christendom had lost connection with the east and the Empire, the people of the west gathered for guidance and cowered for protection. Gregory the Great, while in the case of Phocas he showed his interest in the affairs of the Empire, put forth no claim to dominion. To the recognized autocracy, when that yoke was slipped off by the political powers, succeeded, as the instrument of Papal influence, the Jesuit with his intrigues. Disestablishment has now prevailed in France. It is apparently coming in Spain. "Modernism" advances with the advance of science even in the priesthood. But what is to follow on the fall of the Papacy, a general dissolution or a reunion of Christendom on the broad, moral basis of the Christian ideal, of which there are some signs, the next generation may see. The present generation can do little more than plead for a free course for truth.

GOLDWIN SMITH.

P.S.—It may be remembered that not long ago the London "Daily Telegraph" published a selection from a series of nine thousand letters which had been received by it in three months from people seeking light on the subject of religion. The subject, therefore, is thoroughly and urgently before the world.